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'No politics in the agenda-setting meeting': plenary agenda setting in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The process of agenda setting is fundamental to politics, yet there is surprisingly little research about this process in parliamentary systems. The reason for this lacuna is that agenda setting tends to occur behind closed doors. The Dutch *Tweede Kamer* is an exception to this rule: decisions about the parliamentary agenda are made in public. This study examines agenda setting in the Dutch parliament from an issue-competition perspective. It looks at a sample of more than 400 agenda-setting meetings of the Dutch parliament between 1998 and 2017. It finds that opposition parties which stand far from the government make proposals on issues that they 'own'; these proposals are supported by other opposition parties, parties that stand close to them and focus on the same issue. Coalition parties and parties that stand far away sabotage these proposals.

KEYWORDS Agenda setting; parliamentary politics; Netherlands; government opposition; issue-ownership; left – right

Who determines the agenda is a key question political science (Bachrach and Baratz 1962): a parliament can only make decisions on those issues that make it onto the parliamentary agenda (Cox and McCubbins 2007; Döring 1995a; Laver and Shepsle 1994: 295; Tsebelis and Rasch 2011). Despite its importance, surprisingly little is known about decision making on the parliamentary agenda. The reason for this lacuna is obvious. Most political scientists follow Lukes (1974: 22) in thinking of agenda setting as a covert way of wielding power: indeed in nearly all agenda setting in European parliaments occurs behind closed doors (Döring 1995a).¹ The lower house of the Dutch parliament (*Tweede Kamer*) is exceptional because here agenda setting occurs in public (Döring 1995a). This is a

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unique case that allows one to observe and analyse decision-making processes that otherwise occur behind closed doors. It is unknown what structures political competition over the parliamentary agenda. This study seeks to address this lacuna by studying the agenda-setting meetings (*Regeling van Werkzaamheden*) of the Dutch lower house. These are short public and plenary meetings held at least once a week in which the lower house is in session. During these meetings, MPs can propose agenda items for the upcoming plenary sessions and (informal) votes are held to determine the agenda. The Speaker often tells the MPs “no politics in the agenda-setting meeting”.² The Speaker means to say there is no room for substantive debate, but in this way they appear to be oblivious to the fundamentally political nature of agenda setting.

This article studies agenda setting from a party-political perspective. It builds further on the idea of Green-Pedersen (2010) that agenda setting in parliament ought to be understood from an issue competition perspective. That is the idea that parties compete with each other over which issues are on the agenda. Parties seek to politicise issues that are beneficial to them and draw attention away from issues that are not. While most studies on issue competition have looked at the electoral arena, Green-Pedersen (2010) proposes that it is useful to understand the parliamentary arena as well: in parliament parties can force other parties to directly address the issue they raise. The studies of parliamentary agenda setting have focused on parliamentary questions (Borghetto and Russo 2018; Green-Pedersen 2010; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Meijer and Van der Veer 2018; Otjes and Louwerse 2018; Thesen 2014; Van de Wardt 2015; Vliegthart and Walgrave 2011; Vliegthart *et al.* 2011; 2013; Walgrave *et al.* 2007). There are however a number of drawbacks to studying the parliamentary agenda through parliamentary questions: not only are these mostly symbolic tools with little impact on policy making, they are also not the best way to look at strategic competition, because one cannot observe directly how parties react to the behaviour of other parties. So instead of looking at parliamentary questions, this article studies parliamentary proposals for the agenda and how political parties respond to proposals of other parties by voicing their support or opposition or even sabotaging them.

This study focuses on the process of determining which items will be on the plenary agenda of parliament. Thus, it looks at control over the topical agenda, i.e. which issues come up for debate in plenary (Döring 2005). That is, whether parliament decides to allocate time to discuss the bill on military pensions, to debate an upcoming meeting of the European Council or to ask questions of the minister concerning the salaries of CEOs. The topical agenda should be distinguished from control

over the legislative voting agenda; that is, control over the bills that will be voted upon by parliament (Döring 2005). The legislative voting agenda has been studied in greater detail (e.g. Cox and McCubbins 2007; Tsebelis and Rasch 2011). The two issues, while conceptually distinct, are not unrelated. Döring (1995b) shows that control by the government over plenary time is correlated with its control over the passage of legislation.

This article analyses a random sample of over 400 agenda-setting meetings between 1998 and 2017. Even the fact that in the Dutch parliament decisions about the agenda are made in public, while in all other European parliaments such decisions are made in secret, indicates that agenda setting in the Dutch parliament differs from parliamentary agenda setting in other parliaments. Despite the fact that agenda setting in the Dutch parliament is exceptional, an analysis of the decision making on parliamentary agenda setting here is worthwhile. Because so little is known about the actual process of agenda setting, even a single case study can elucidate how parliaments make decisions about the agenda. Applying established theories from the comparative literature on party and parliamentary politics to agenda setting allows one to assess whether agenda setting conforms to or deviates from the established patterns of party and parliamentary politics. The results found in the Dutch case are more likely to be relevant for similar multi-party consensus democracies.

This study is guided by a central research question: *which parliamentary parties effectively control the plenary agenda of the lower house of the Dutch parliament?* This is answered by looking at three sub-questions: first, *under what conditions do parliamentary parties propose items for the parliamentary agenda?* Parties can respond in a number of ways to a proposal from another party: they can vote in favour, vote against or abstain from voting, or they can sabotage it. Sabotage is defined here as making a counterproposal that aims to prevent a specific debate from being held in the plenary. This can include proposing to discuss the issue in committee. The second and third questions concern these kinds of responses: *how do parliamentary parties vote on such proposals* and *under what conditions do parties sabotage the proposals of their peers?*

Issue competition in parliament

Following Green-Pedersen (2010), the recent literature on parliamentary behaviour has brought in an issue competition perspective (e.g. Thesen 2014; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011). This focuses on the idea of issue competition, which has been a prominent approach in party politics for decades (Budge 2015; Green-Pedersen 2007; Petrocik 1996; Robertson 1976). As Carmines and Stimson (1989: 6) succinctly put it, '[a]ll

successful politicians instinctively understand which issues benefit them and their party and which do not. The trick is to politicise the former and deemphasise the latter'. Thus, parties prefer to speak about issues they are competent on and force other parties to talk about issues they are not competent on (Walgrave *et al.* 2015). Political competition focuses on selective emphasis of issues rather than direct confrontation on those issues. Many studies of this phenomenon focus on the electoral arena. It can also be applied to the parliamentary arena: parties will tend to propose debates about issues they own. So, labour parties will propose debates about labour market issues. Parties prefer to hold parliamentary debates on issues they own in order to shift media and public attention on issues on which they are seen as competent. Meanwhile other parties are forced to respond to that issue (Green-Pedersen 2010). As Otjes and Louwerse (2018) propose: parliamentary tools 'are used in the permanent election campaign between parties: [they] are the continuation of election campaign with different means'. If a party is able to set the tone in parliament, they may be able to set the themes for the election campaign. Parties may also have more strategic reasons to operate like this. A debate request can be used to maintain ownership of the issue: parties may use it to mark a party's territory vis-à-vis other parliamentary parties (Walgrave *et al.* 2015: 789–90). By proposing a debate on an issue, parties signal to interest groups, party activists, journalists and through them to voters that their MPs are 'working' on that issue. Proposing debates is not necessarily just motivated by an issue competition strategy. Parties that write a lot about issues in their manifestos and seek to talk about those issues in parliament may simply be intrinsically motivated to solve those policy issues. Green MPs may genuinely want to debate the solutions to environmental problems.

This study adds to existing and growing literature that integrates insights about issue competition into parliament by testing the expectation that issue attention outside of parliament predicts issue attention in parliament. Studies of agenda setting in parliament have almost exclusively focused on parliamentary questions. The theoretical reason to focus on this tool compared to other tools MPs have is that the right of MPs to ask questions tends to be unconstrained by rules. MPs do not need the consent of a majority of parliament to ask a question. This means that these can genuinely be taken to reflect the priorities of the party or an individual MP. A lot of other parliamentary activity is limited by gatekeepers of some kind. An MP can only propose amendments if a bill is proposed; they can only propose motions if a debate is scheduled.

Most studies that look at parliamentary agenda setting in Western Europe look at parliamentary questions, often at written questions. There is something ironic about this: written parliamentary questions are asked

outside of the debates, as that agenda is controlled by gatekeepers. Moreover, as Van Aelst and Vliegenthart (2014) observe, parliamentary questions are only symbolic and have no or very limited policy consequences. They are still of use to parties, however: 'they do not have tangible consequences, but their aim is foremost to communicate with the public' (Walgrave *et al.* 2007: 823). Written questions, however, rarely receive direct attention (Green-Pedersen 2010: 350). Plenary debates offer a way to communicate with the public, they get televised and are reported on by the traditional media. The access to the media is crucial, because it is through the media that political parties build their issue ownership in the minds of voters (Walgrave *et al.* 2009). In addition to this, parliamentary debates allow MPs to propose actual policy changes. So by studying parliamentary debates one can try to shift the study of issue competition in parliament towards a realm of substantive decision making.

Finally, compared to parliamentary questions, proposals to hold a plenary debate may also be a better way to analyse issue *competition*. Competition implies conflict over a limited resource. Plenary time to hold debates is a scarce resource (Döring 1995a). There is no limit to the number of written questions. So parties may be even more strategic when it comes to scheduling debates in the plenary, in both proposing them and preventing them. When studying parliamentary questions one only looks at successful cases and not at unsuccessful attempts to set the agenda: they cannot study the inputs that went into these decisions or the patterns of decision making, that is, *which* parties supported, opposed or even sabotaged the proposals of their colleagues. The strategic value of plenary debates also comes from the fact that holding a debate forces other parties to respond. If a party asks a question about an issue there is no need for other parties to engage with that issue. If a debate is scheduled about an issue, it is not just the party that proposed the debate that will need to address it, but also the other parties. Parties have a strategic interest in forcing other parties to talk about issues they do not own: they can make parties talk about issues on which their positions are unpopular.³ Studying how parties respond to debate proposals of other parties allows one to examine the strategic aspects of issue competition in a way that studying parliamentary questions does not allow.

1a. *Saliency Proposal Hypothesis*: the more attention political parties spend on an issue in their election manifesto, the more agenda proposals parliamentary parties will make on that issue.

The success of proposals for the parliamentary agenda is determined by the other parties, which act as gatekeepers. Issue competition may also structure the responses of parties to proposals by other parties. But these run in two different directions: on the one hand, parties may compete

with each other over which party is issue owner. If one considers issue ownership as something that may be won or lost, parties may have a strategic interest in preventing other parties from initiating debates on issues that they own. Parties may then not allow another party to schedule a debate on issue they consider their own. On the other hand, parties may simply be interested in debate issues that they think are important and may therefore support proposals on issues that they own, independent of who proposed them. The hypothesis reflects the simpler, positive perspective, but the positive and negative perspectives have different implications about how to think about issue competition: do parties fear losing it to competitors? Or simply prefer talking about their own issues? Do parties compete for issue ownership or for control over the agenda?

1b. *Saliency Support Hypothesis*: the more attention political parties spend on an issue in their election manifesto, the more likely parliamentary parties are to favour agenda proposals on that issue.

1c. *Saliency Sabotage Hypothesis*: the more attention political parties spend on an issue in their election manifesto, the less likely parliamentary parties are to sabotage agenda proposals on that issue.

Partisan and positional considerations

The existing literature on agenda setting in parliament offers a number of alternative expectations about agenda setting that need to be taken into account. In their study of the role of government in determining which bills are brought to the plenary, Tsebelis and Rasch (2011: 2–3) distinguish three ways of controlling the agenda. Firstly, the institutional method: the provisions of the parliamentary rules of procedure that give power to individual MPs, minorities of MPs or parliamentary majorities to affect the agenda. Secondly, the partisan method: the majority coalitions can control which bills come to the plenary like a cartel (Cox and McCubbins 2007). Thirdly, the positional method: majorities can also be reached because a majority of the MPs prefers some policy outcome over the status quo. The expectations that can be derived from partisan and positional considerations will be discussed in detail below. The specific institutional rules in the lower house of the Dutch parliament will be discussed in the section on ‘the Dutch case’.

Policy positions

The literature on issue competition in parliament emphasises the importance of differences in priorities between parties. That would mean that parties that focus on bread-and-butter socio-economic issues have an

interest to maintain parliamentary attention to those issues, even when their policy positions on the issue are completely different. This, however neglects that these parties have different ideological positions that make them more or less likely to propose or support such debates. When it comes to making proposals, the role of ideology cannot be wholly separated from the composition of the government. The political colour of the government matters greatly for the behaviour of the opposition (see Louwerse *et al.* 2017). A right-wing party is more likely to be satisfied with what is proposed by a centre-right coalition, even if it is in the opposition, than a left-wing party is. Therefore, left-wing parties are more likely to propose debates criticising the government or proposing alternative policies during centre-right cabinets than right-wing parties are, or put more generally:

2a. *Positional Proposal Hypothesis*: The greater the distance between a parliamentary party and the coalition, the more items for the plenary agenda the party will propose.

When it comes to voting or sabotage, one can expect policy differences to matter as well. Parties are more likely to support agenda proposals of parties that are ideologically close to them, because these parties want the same kind of policy change that a debate and the subsequent proposing of motions will allow for. The best way to block a party from proposing a policy proposal that you oppose is to prevent a debate on that issue and with that the opportunity to propose a motion on it. Moreover, a party may agree with the way the issue is framed by the proposing party; a left-wing party may disagree with the way a right-wing party frames immigration, and therefore they may be more inclined to vote against their proposal to debate it, even if they think the issue of immigration is important.

2b. *Positional Support Hypothesis*: The greater the distance between a parliamentary party and the party proposing an item for the agenda, the less likely a parliamentary party is to favour that proposal.

2c. *Positional Sabotage Hypothesis*: The greater the distance between a party and the party proposing an item for the agenda, the more likely a parliamentary party is to sabotage that proposal.

Partisan considerations

In addition to competition between left-wing and right-wing parties and between parties that emphasise different issues, the distinction between government and opposition parties is crucial to understanding many different facets of parliamentary behaviour (King 1976). Specifically, in

studies of the legislative voting agenda, the central idea is that the majority coalition controls the agenda (Cox and McCubbins 2007). One can expect this difference to persist when it comes to proposing issues to debate (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). In systems with weak government control over the parliamentary agenda, coalition parties will have longer, formal agreements before they enter coalition in order to hammer out deals to prevent disputes between the parties in parliament (De Winter 1995: 143–4). These agreements will put the government in the driver's seat concerning the agenda: the agreement will instruct the government to put issues on the agenda. This means that coalition parties are in the passenger seat: they will be less inclined to propose issues to debate. In contrast, opposition parties have a strong interest in proposing new debates. In particular, they have an incentive to criticise the government. They 'want to attack and are especially attentive to bad news potentially portraying the government as losers' (Thesen 2014: 368).

3a. *Opposition Proposal Hypothesis*: Opposition parties will propose more items for the plenary agenda than coalition parties will.

During multi-party majority cabinets, coalition parties are likely to act as a bloc in order to maintain the stability of the cabinet (De Winter 1995): the coalition will attempt to deny the opposition control of the agenda. The ability of a coalition to exercise control over what is debated in the plenary is crucial for its control over what is actually voted upon: if a debate is held, motions (called resolutions in some countries) can be proposed.

3b. *Coalition Support Hypothesis*: Coalition parties will favour proposals of the opposition parties less often than opposition parties will.

Coalition parties have a special interest in sabotaging debates, in particular on issues which are new to the agenda, and on which the government has not yet taken a position. By postponing the debate they can give the government an opportunity to formulate a position and therefore an opportunity to the coalition to strike a compromise on the issue.

3c. *Coalition Sabotage Hypothesis*: Coalition parties will sabotage proposals of the opposition parties more often than opposition parties will.

The Dutch case

This article analyses agenda setting in the Dutch case. According to Döring (1995a: 225), the Dutch parliament is the only one in Europe where decisions about plenary agenda setting are made in public. This does mean, however, that one has to deal with the peculiarities of the Dutch case. By no account is it 'representative' of European parliaments.

The fact that agenda setting occurs in the open means that unscrupulous power plays are less likely than in systems where this occurs behind closed doors.

Döring (1995a: 225) proposes a scale on parliamentary agenda setting, ranging from most to least government control: it can be determined by the government, as it is in the UK and Ireland; it can be set by the Presidium of the parliament (as it is in France, Greece, Luxembourg, Portugal and Switzerland); it can be decided on by the Presidium with the right of the parliamentary majority to overturn it (as is the case in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Norway and Spain); it can be determined by the Speaker (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Italy and Sweden); or it can be decided on in the plenary.⁴ Government control over the parliamentary agenda is strongly correlated with the level of consensus democracy (Tsebelis 2002).⁵

Two actors are involved in the formal agenda setting in the Second Chamber: the Speaker and the plenary. The Speaker is elected by a parliamentary majority. Since 2002, these elections have been open and competitive. Speakers are often member of coalition parties, but this is not necessarily the case. Decisions about the parliamentary agenda are made in the plenary. Every plenary session is opened by an agenda-setting meeting (Tweede Kamer 2016: art. 54). During these planning meetings any MP or the Speaker can propose to hold parliamentary debates and other MPs can express support for holding such debates. The Speaker starts these sessions by scheduling plenary reports of committee meetings or debates on legislation. The decision to hold these debates is not (or at least no longer) controversial since they build on earlier decisions in the committees. Therefore, these decisions are made by consensus. There may be a political process of decision making about when to schedule legislation or committee meetings, but this does not occur in the public plenary agenda-setting meetings. Rather it occurs behind the closed doors of meetings of the coalition parties. Decisions about the proposals are made after short debates: spokespersons of parliamentary parties express their support for specific debates verbally on behalf of all members of their group. The Speaker keeps a tally of the support, assuming that every MP represents their entire party.

Effectively, there are four kinds of debates. Table 1 provides an overview of shares of the debate requests in the sample:

1. A legislative debate (*plenaire behandeling*): most bills are debated only in the plenary (Tweede Kamer 2016: arts. 43, 91, art. 101.1).⁶ Debates on legislation tend to be proposed by the Speaker at the beginning of the agenda-setting sessions and these are almost always

Table 1. Kinds of items proposed.

Items	Percentage
Legislative Debate	30% [28, 32]
Plenary Report of a General Committee Meeting	29% [27, 31]
Majority Debate	22% [20, 24]
Thirty-Member Debate	14% [12, 16]
Plenary Report of Written Committee Meeting	2% [1, 2]
Interpellation	1% [1, 2]
Others	2% [1, 3]

With 95% confidence interval.

added to the agenda without a vote. This means the political process of scheduling legislative and non-legislative plenary debates is divorced from the political process of scheduling legislative plenary debates. During the period under study 98% of bills were proposals by the government and only 2% were initiatives by individual MPs.

2. A majority debate (*meerderheidsdebat*): this is a debate on any issue scheduled with the support of a majority. Majority debates include debates on any document other than a bill sent to parliament without a preceding committee debate.⁷ When setting the timetable majority debates are given priority over 30-member debates.
3. A 30-member debate (*dertigledendebat*): this is a debate on any subject. As the name implies, the support of 30 members (20% of MPs) is required to plan a 30-member debate. It was added to standing orders on 31 March 2004. In the same revision of the parliamentary procedures, the number of MPs necessary to hold an interpellation (*interpellatie*) was lowered from 76 to 30. There is one key difference between an interpellation and a 30-member debate: An interpellation is held as soon as possible, while a 30-member debate is put on the bottom of the list of debates (Tweede Kamer 2016: arts. 54a, 133).
4. A plenary report of a general committee meeting (*verslag algemeen overleg*): MPs cannot propose motions during general committee meetings; they can only do so during the plenary. A plenary report is a short plenary session where MPs can propose motions. The same is true for a report of a written committee meeting (*verslag schriftelijk overleg*), a formal exchange of thoughts between committee members and the government via writing. (Tweede Kamer 2016: art. 4). A single MP has the right to have a plenary report for a committee meeting.

The agenda-setting meetings are somewhat informal. Spokespersons can do more than express their support for or opposition to a debate; they can also make other comments, react to other MPs or make their support conditional. They may propose to debate the issue in an alternative venue such as in the committee. They can propose to add the issue

to another plenary debate. They could also request a letter from the cabinet before the debate can be scheduled. This document could defuse the political issue at hand or simply postpone a debate so that the coalition can come up with a solution or so that the issue is no longer salient. All these alternatives can give other MPs a reason not to back the proposal to put an item on the agenda. Proposing these alternatives is considered sabotage in this study. As the process of agenda setting is somewhat informal, spokespersons also have the option of not speaking out. What abstaining from the discussion meant has changed over time. Before the introduction of 30-member debates, the informal rule was: 'if you agree, you do not have to speak out'.⁸ After the introduction of the 30-member debates, if MPs do not speak out, their parliamentary party was counted as against the debate. Therefore one could expect parties to abstain less after 2004. Also it seems likely that, after the introduction of 30-member debates, opposition parties will have proposed more debates. The introduction of 30-member debates also means that the coalition control over the plenary agenda may have weakened after 2004.

Methodology

This article looks at agenda-setting meetings of the lower house of the Dutch parliament between the 1998 and 2017 parliamentary elections. These data have been collected manually from the website that hosts the minutes of the Dutch parliament (Officiële Bekendmakingen 2018). Over 400 of these were randomly sampled (21%). Table 2 shows how the stratified random sample was divided over the periods. A database was made with all the proposals for parliamentary debates held during these sessions. For each proposal, it was noted who made the proposal, what kind of debate was proposed, what the debate concerned, whether spokespersons of other parliamentary parties supported or opposed the debate, the date of the session and finally to what extent MPs attempted to sabotage the process. 1760 proposals for agenda items were obtained. These form the 'random sample' of agenda proposals that this study is based on. Appendix 1 shows the kind of text used and what kind of information was extracted. It also illustrates a successful sabotage attempt. Of the 1760 proposals, 66% were made by a spokesperson and 34% by the Speaker; 91% concern the proposal to add a plenary debate, and the other 9% concerns proposals to remove or reschedule a debate.

Two different kinds of analyses are performed. The first aims to explain how many proposals each parliamentary party makes concerning a specific issue per parliamentary term. To this end, every agenda proposal was categorised according to the Dutch coding book of the

Table 2. Number of agenda-setting meetings.

Start	End	Total	Sample	Requests
1998	2002	390	82	214
2002	2003	62	14	45
2003	2006	388	79	261
2006	2010	362	76	304
2010	2012	229	48	249
2012	2017	623	132	687

Comparative Agenda Project (Breeman and Timmermans 2008). The categorisation scheme employed was developed for the US case in the influential study of Baumgartner and Jones (1993) and has since been developed for comparative use (Baumgartner *et al.* 2006). The categories used are listed in [Appendix 2](#). These data concern 1254 party-issue-period triads. To test the *Saliency Proposal Hypothesis*, a data set was employed which looked at the share of each party's election manifesto that concerned the same issue categories (Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2017). The attention devoted to the issue variable reflects the share of each manifesto of that party devoted to that issue in the election before that period. To test the *Positional Proposal Hypothesis*, the policy position of the party on the general left-right dimension was drawn from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey that was closest to the election. The absolute distance between this and the weighted mean of the CHES general left-right position of the coalition parties was then calculated. To test the *Opposition Proposal Hypothesis* a variable was created: that is, 1 if the party is in the coalition for the majority of that period and 0 if it was not. This means that parties are incorrectly categorised during periods of cabinet formation or when they left government, but during those periods of caretaker government considerably less parliamentary debates are scheduled, so this incorrect categorisation is unlikely to impact on the conclusion. This analysis includes three control variables. Firstly, whether the parliamentary term preceded or came after the introduction of 30-member debates. To accurately test this, the 2003–2006 term was divided into two parts – before and after 31 March 2004. Secondly, the duration of the term in days, as parties have more opportunities to propose debates during longer terms. Thirdly, the number of MPs, because parliamentary parties are more likely to want schedule debates if they have more MPs. All independent variables were recalculated between 0 and 1 to aid interpretation. A negative binomial multilevel analysis with random effects for every party-period combination was employed. The choice for the negative binomial model is due to the fact that the count data is clearly over-dispersed (as can be seen from the descriptive data in [Table 3](#)). The choice for a multilevel analysis is because data on ideological position and coalition participation are the same for every party-year combination.

Table 3. Descriptives for analysis of agenda proposals.

Variable	Mean	Median	S.D.	Min.	Max.	Low	High	N
Number of proposals	0.84	0.00	2.08	0	38	Zero proposals	38 proposals	1273
Coalition	0.28	–	–	0	1	Opposition	Government	1273
Distance to the weighted coalition mean	0.37	0.32	0.27	0	1	Close to the coalition mean	Far from the coalition mean	1254
Party size	0.32	0.16	0.32	0	1	Small (2)	Large (45)	1273
Attention devoted to the issue	0.11	0.10	0.09	0	1	None	Most	1273
After introduction of thirty-member debates	0.60	–	–	0	1	Before 31/3/2004	After 31/3/2004	1273
Length of the period	0.53	0.51	0.35	0	1	Short (252 days)	Long (1645 days)	1273

Many of the same variables return for the second analysis, which looks at how the spokespersons of parliamentary parties reacted to every proposal. There are 6720 vote choices. Spokespersons have three options: speaking out in favour of the debate, speaking out against or abstaining from the discussion. To model these choices three separate binomial multilevel logistic regressions were employed: one on the choice to abstain (as opposed to express a preference); one on the choice to vote in favour (as opposed to abstaining or expressing a preference against); and one on the choice to vote against (as opposed to abstaining or voting in favour). Proposals where no MP spoke out were excluded. These mostly concern the proposal by the Speaker to schedule reports of general committee meetings or legislative debates. The exact same analysis was performed for the choice of spokespersons to sabotage the proposal of another MP, by proposing to discuss the issue in a committee meeting, during a specific other plenary debate or requiring a letter from the government before agreeing to a debate. Only the party that initiated the sabotage action was coded and not the parties that joined in the sabotage action, as those very often are all of the parties that voted against the proposal. There are 294 cases of (attempted) sabotage by another spokesperson. [Table 4](#) provides the descriptive data for this analysis. The analysis is cross-nested; votes occur within party-term dyads and proposals.

To test the *Issue Support Hypothesis* and *Issue Sabotage Hypothesis*, the importance every party attached to the issue was drawn from the same CAP database. To test the *Positional Support Hypothesis* and *Positional Sabotage Hypothesis*, the distance is calculated between the general left-right position of the party, drawn from the CHES that was closest to the election in which the parliament was elected and the CHES general left-right position of the party that proposed the agenda item. To test the *Coalition Support Hypothesis* and *Coalition Sabotage Hypothesis* a variable was created that was 1 if the party was in the coalition at the

Table 4. Descriptives for analysis of votes on agenda proposals.

Variable	Mean	Median	S.D.	Min.	Max.	Low	High	N
Vote on agenda proposal = In favour	0.40	–	–	0	1	Against or abstain	In favour	6720
Vote on agenda proposal = Abstain	0.37	–	–	0	1	Against or in favour	Abstain	6720
Vote on agenda proposal = Against	0.23	–	–	0	1	In favour or abstain	Against	6720
Initiates sabotage	0.04	–	–	0	1	Not the first party to sabotage	The first party to sabotage	6720
Same side of the coalition-opposition division	0.71	–	–	0	1	On different sides	On the same side	6720
Distance to the proposing party	0.37	0.32	0.27	0	1	Close to proposing party	Far from the proposing party	6624
Party Size	0.29	0.23	0.31	0	1	Small (2)	Large (45)	6720
Attention devoted to the issue	0.14	0.13	0.10	0	1	None	Most	6690
After introduction of thirty-member debates	0.95	–	–	0	1	Before 31/3/2004	After 31/3/2004	6720

time of the informal vote, 0 if not. This analysis includes two control variables. Firstly, whether the proposal was made after the introduction of 30-member debates: parties are likely to abstain less often after this was introduced. Secondly, party size: the smaller a parliamentary party is, the more likely it is that its representatives will not participate in the discussions simply because its members are occupied elsewhere.

Proposing items for the agenda

This study collected 1760 proposals to amend the parliamentary agenda. The Speakers made 588 (34%) of these. Of the proposals by the Speaker, 85% were to debate bills in the plenary; 99% were granted without debate. The remaining two-thirds were made by a spokesperson. The following analyses will focus on these proposals. Just less than half of these were proposals concerning a plenary debate after a committee meeting (45%). A third were proposals on majority debates (31%). A fifth were proposals concerning 30-member debates or interpellations (19%). The remainder mainly concerned legislative debates (4%). Below we will return to the role of Speaker.

This section analyses the number of items that party spokespersons proposed for the parliamentary agenda per issue category across six

Table 5. Analysis of agenda proposals.

Variable	Model 1
Intercept	−4.22*** (0.34)
Coalition party	−0.97*** (0.30)
Distance to the weighted coalition mean	1.62*** (0.40)
Party size	2.59*** (0.38)
Attention devoted to the issue	3.73*** (0.45)
After introduction of thirty-member debates	0.80*** (0.23)
Length of the period	2.02*** (0.32)
N	1254
N parties* term	66
Intercepts (parties* term)	0.37 (0.61)
Log-likelihood	−1234

Multilevel negative binomial regression with random intercepts for every party * term combination
0.1 > * > 0.05 ** > 0.01 > ***

periods. A multilevel negative binomial regression with random effects for the party-period dyads is shown in Table 5. First, the *Saliency Proposal Hypothesis* holds that parties that devote more attention to an issue are more likely to propose agenda items on that issue. The idea is that requesting debates on a certain topic is a way to maintain issue ownership. This is indeed the case. If one moves from the party that spends the least attention to an issue in their manifesto to the party that spends the most attention to an issue in their manifesto, the number of proposals for the agenda made by that party in parliament, becomes 40 times higher. Note that the party that spends the most attention to an issue is the level of attention that the ‘single issue’ Party for the Animals spend on agriculture in 2006. The latter is of course an extreme case, but the relationship actually becomes stronger outliers are removed. Secondly, the *Positional Proposal Hypothesis* proposes that the further a party is from the policy position of the government, the more likely it is that they would propose agenda items. As right-wing parties are more likely to be dissatisfied with the policy of a centre-left cabinet than left-wing parties, they are more likely to make proposals. This is indeed the case. The parties that are furthest from the mean of the coalition parties are five times as likely to make proposals.

Thirdly, the *Opposition Proposal Hypothesis* is tested: opposition parties are more likely to propose items for the parliamentary agenda, as they create opportunities to criticise the government. This is indeed the case: coalition parties propose about 60% fewer items for the agenda than opposition parties.

A number of control variables were also included: as the time periods have different lengths, a control for the length of the period seems obvious: during the longest period (1645 days) parties proposed more than six times more agenda items than during the shortest period (252 days). The analysis also took into account party size: the idea is that parties with

more spokespersons have more capacity to request plenary debates. This is indeed the case. The largest parties (45 seats) made twelve times more proposals for a debate than the smallest parties (2 seats). Finally, and most substantially, there is the effect of change in the institutional context: allowing minority MPs to request debates increases the number of debates. The number of debate requests under the system with 30-member debates was twice as high as the number of debate requests before.

Decision making on items for the agenda

After a spokesperson has made a proposal, two things can happen: either the Speaker can grant the proposal or an informal round of voting can occur. When it comes to the 1167 proposals made by a spokesperson, 522 (45%) were granted without a round of voting; 92% of these were proposals to hold a plenary meeting following a committee meeting. This analysis focuses on the remaining 645 proposals (55%) where some form of voting did occur. More than half of these proposals concerned majority debates (55%). A third concerned 30-member debates (33%). The remaining proposals concerned both committee debates and legislative debates (7% and 5%).

Spokespersons have four options when a proposal item comes up: they can choose not to participate in the discussion, to speak out in favour of the proposal, to speak out against, or to speak out against and initiate sabotage by making a counterproposal to scheduling a plenary debate. Four multilevel logistic regression analyses with random effects for the party-year dyads and for the proposal voted on were used to evaluate these options (see [Table 6](#)).

The analyses test three hypotheses concerning voting. Firstly, the question whether the competition between parties is over issue ownership or agenda control. If parties compete over issue ownership, one would expect that parties would react negatively to another party proposing a new item for the agenda on an issue they own. They may fear losing control over the issue. If parties compete for agenda control, they will vote in favour of a proposal to debate an issue they prioritise, independent of who made it. When moving from the party that paid the least attention to an issue to the party that devoted the most attention to that issue, the chance of it supporting the proposal increases by more than 600%. Again, the party that devoted the most attention to an issue was the single-issue Party for the Animals. The effect remains strong, significant and in the correct dimension if the outliers are removed. The same change in attention to an issue decreases the chance of abstaining by 90%. It does not affect the chance of voting against. This is clear support for the idea that

Table 6. Analysis of voting on agenda proposals.

Variable	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Dependent Variable	In favour vs. Abstain/Against	Abstain vs. In favour/Against	Against vs. In favour/Abstain	Initiates Sabotage
Intercept	-1.33*** (0.34) 1.14*** (0.11)	1.00*** (0.32) -0.54*** (0.11)	-3.82*** (0.45) -1.02*** (0.13)	-5.52*** (0.49) -0.32* (0.18)
Same side of the coalition-opposition division				
Distance to the proposing party	-2.85*** (0.14)	1.77*** (0.14)	2.07*** (0.18)	0.98*** (0.25)
Party size	1.40** (0.41)	-3.28*** (0.41)	2.69*** (0.43)	3.01*** (0.35)
Attention devoted to the issue	2.04*** (0.36)	-2.26*** (0.36)	0.54 (0.57)	-0.22 (0.76)
After introduction of thirty-member debates	0.10 (0.31)	-0.60** (0.28)	0.77* (0.41)	0.94** (0.40)
Log-likelihood	-3579	-3325	-2629	-1033
N	6595	6595	6595	6595
N proposals	636	636	636	636
N parties* term	56	56	56	56
Intercepts (proposals)	0.90 (0.95)	0.70 (0.83)	2.45 (1.57)	0.00 (0.00)
Intercepts (parties* term)	0.82 (0.91)	0.72 (0.85)	0.75 (0.86)	0.12 (0.35)

Multilevel logistic regression with random intercepts for every proposal and every party * term combination

*0.1 >; **0.05; ***0.01 >

parties compete with other parties over control over the issue agenda, not ownership of the issue itself. Secondly, parties that are close to each other ideologically are more likely to support each other's proposals for the agenda. This is also supported by the evidence: the left-wing Socialist Party is 95% less likely to support proposals of the radical right-wing populist Freedom Party than a proposal from a party that has the same ideological position as itself. In line with this finding, moving the same distance increases the chance of abstaining by almost 500% and the chance of voting by almost 700%.

Finally, opposition parties are likely to vote in favour of proposals of other opposition parties and coalition parties are more likely to vote in favour of proposals of other coalition parties. There is support for this: if a party is on the same side of the coalition-opposition division as the party that proposed it, it is three times as likely to support its proposal. In line with this finding, parties are about 40% less likely to abstain on a proposal made from the same side of the coalition-opposition divide and about 60% less likely to vote against it.

Two control variables were included: firstly, party size. The largest party in the data set is 96% less likely to abstain compared to the smallest party under study. Likewise, it increases the chance of speaking out either in favour (by more than 300%) or against (by almost 1400%). Secondly, the possibility of holding 30-member debates. This makes abstaining 45% less likely and doubles the chance of voting against, but does not affect voting in favour. This means that with the introduction of 30-member debates parliamentary parties moved from not speaking out to explicitly opposing new items for the agenda.

Finally, the hypotheses concerning the initiation of sabotage are tested. This is whether a party in response to an agenda proposal of another party is the first to propose an alternative to the debate. The analysis examines the first party initiating the sabotage. The expectations mirror those of voting favour: firstly, there is no support for the hypothesis concerning issue ownership. There is no effect of the attention a party devoted to an issue and the chance that it initiates sabotage on that issue. Second, coalition parties are likely to sabotage proposals made by the opposition and vice versa. Being on opposite sides of this divide makes it 40% more likely to sabotage a proposal. More important for initiating a sabotage is ideological distance: a party is twice as likely to sabotage a debate proposal from a party that is most distant from itself than a proposal made by a party that has the same ideological position. There is a strong effect of size: the largest party is 24 times more likely to initiate sabotage than the smallest party. This may be because sabotaging a debate will diminish the goodwill a party has and smaller parties have greater

need of the goodwill of other parties in order to have their own proposals (for the plenary agenda) adopted, while larger parties can, for instance, ask for a 30-member debate on their own.

Who has effective control over the plenary agenda?

The final question of this study is who controls the agenda of the lower house of the Dutch parliament? [Figure 1](#) sheds some light on this. It shows what proportion of actually adopted proposals to put an item on the agenda was made by the coalition, by the opposition or by the Speaker. Before the introduction of 30-member debates, the Speaker made three out five successful proposals. The opposition made a quarter. After the introduction of 30-member debates, more than half of the successful proposals for the agenda were made by an opposition spokesperson. The Speaker made a third of the successful agenda proposals. The introduction of 30-member debates has shifted agenda control away from the Speaker and towards the opposition. The Speaker mainly makes proposals that are no longer controversial, as they build on earlier work in committees.

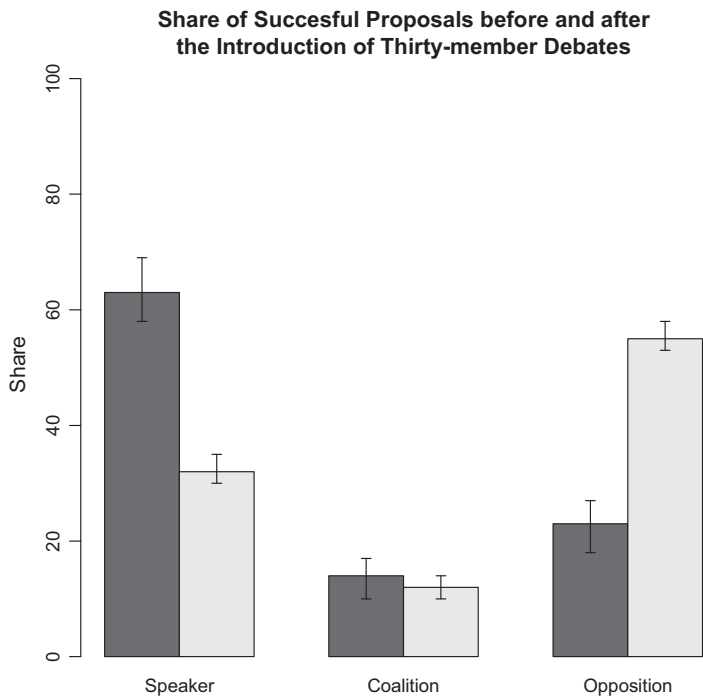


Figure 1. Successful agenda proposals before and after the introduction of thirty-member debates.
With 95% confidence interval.

These are adopted unanimously without discussion. After the introduction of 30-member debates, the opposition completely dominated agenda setting in the lower house of the Dutch parliament. The ability of the coalition to keep control over the agenda has dwindled, the opposition is essentially stealing the show.⁹

Conclusion

The Dutch *Tweede Kamer* is an exceptional case because the formal process of agenda setting occurs in the plenary of this parliament, while in all other European parliaments such decisions are made behind closed doors. This has allowed for this study to take place. In the plenary decisions are made to hold all kinds of debates, but the proposals to debate laws are often decided upon by consensus and real decision making mainly concerns non-legislative debates. This study thus was able to observe part of the agenda-setting process, but not all of it. The fact that decisions about the agenda in the Dutch parliament are (partially) made in public is in itself already a sign of weak agenda control by the coalition government (Döring 1995a). The Dutch parliament is characterised by its consensual mode of operation, a stark contrast with some other European parliaments, such as the House of Commons (2017). The Netherlands are unlikely to be a representative case for the whole of Europe in terms of its agenda setting. Still, it is a crucially important case for empirical research, because so little is known about the actual patterns of agenda setting. Moreover, Dutch patterns may be similar to other more consensual systems such as Sweden, where coalition and opposition party groups are consulted in the process of agenda setting, or Germany where the decisions are made by the *Ältestenrat*, where all parties are represented.

This study shows a number of things that are likely to be the case in such systems. The key finding of this study is that the key expectations from the issue-competition approach to parliamentary behaviour are supported: parties tend to propose agenda items on issues that they find important. They prefer that parliament debates issues that they prioritise. This result confirms earlier findings in this literature. This article however looked at parliamentary agenda setting as competition over a limited resource and also examined how parties responded to the proposals of other parties. When a particular party is faced with the question whether to support a debate proposal of another party on an issue that this first party prioritises, the party is much more likely to support the proposal than not. So, parties prefer parliament to talk about an issue they think is important and do not vote down debates by other parties on issues they

own in order to ensure that they maintain issue ownership. In short, parties are competing for limited plenary time, not over ownership of issues.

Other elements than issue competition play a role in parliamentary agenda setting: coalition parties are occupied with attempting to block such proposals, by speaking out against these proposals, by staying silent during these meetings (therefore denying the proposals the necessary majorities), by sabotaging proposals for new agenda items or by outright opposing new agenda items. The coalition parties try to deny opposition parties the chance to hold debates on their issues. Secondly, while cooperation within the coalition is strong, it is not the only pattern: ideology also plays a role in agenda setting, in terms of both positional differences between parties and issue priorities: so, the greater the distance between a party and the government, the more likely it is that that party will make agenda proposals. Moreover, parties tend to support agenda proposals from parties that are close to them and sabotage agenda proposals from parties that are far away from them.

So instead of there being no place for politics in the agenda-setting meeting, it is clearly a forum for 'party politics as usual'. When made visible, the often invisible patterns of decision making on whether to place an issue on the agenda do not differ greatly from patterns of decision making on issues that are on the agenda, which can be observed. Given that agenda setting reflects established patterns from party and parliamentary politics about the division between coalition and opposition, left and right and issue competition, it seems reasonable that those dynamics also play a role in agenda setting in other parliaments. This means that similar patterns are likely to occur behind closed doors.¹⁰ So it seems likely that in the *Ältestenrat* of the German Bundestag in the 2009–2013 period, *Bündnis '90/Die Grünen* proposed more agenda items on the environmental issues than on issues related to business. Moreover, it seems likely that as an opposition party it proposed more agenda items than the *Freie Demokratische Partei*, which was in government at the time. These expectations would have been fair before this study and these results corroborate them.¹¹

What is exceptional in the Dutch case is the power that minorities have to determine the agenda. These rights are so strong that the coalition has little actual control over the agenda: with the introduction of 30-member debates, control over the agenda shifted away from the Speaker to the opposition, which currently makes more than half of successful proposals for the agenda. The situation before the introduction of 30-member debates is more likely to be representative of what happens in other consensus systems where agenda setting is not completely monopolised by the government: a majority of what actually comes to the plenary

is not controversial because it reflects work already done at the committee level.

What is perhaps most notable about this analysis is that control over the plenary agenda and control over the legislative agenda are completely divorced: the government has the lead in proposing legislation and the opposition has the lead in proposing parliamentary debates. This is a peculiar way for the Dutch parliament to strike a balance between ‘the right of the majority to govern and the right of minorities to be heard’ (Huber 1994: 1): a minority can use the bully pulpit of the plenary to voice its opinion on any pressing matter and get responses from coalition parties. Opposition parties can use these debates to criticise government policy but they cannot really use them to shape policy: they can only propose non-binding parliamentary motions. Meanwhile, the production of legislation continues independently with the government in the driver’s seat: 98% of these bills are proposals of the government. The proposals to put these bills on the agenda are not voted on. The agenda-setting process on bills occurs behind closed doors. The opposition minority has practically monopolised debating, but the coalition majority monopolised legislating.

Notes

1. Stecker (2008) finds no cases with so little government control as the Netherlands in Central Europe either.
2. Handelingen 2010–2011 25/1/2011 (Officiële Bekendmakingen 2018).
3. Not participating in debates is not just “not done”, but also means that the other parties that do participate in the debate will be able to control how the issue the debate is on is framed and how it and what kind of substantive proposals will be voted upon.
4. In Israel, parliamentary parties can propose motions for the agenda, which are voted upon in the plenary. This is one way in which Members of the Knesset can put items on the agenda. These issues however are referred to a specific committee and the number of proposals per year voted upon is small (Akirav 2014).
5. The “party-executives dimension” from Lijphart (1999)’s model.
6. They are preceded by a written exchange by specialist MPs . A plenary majority can decide to only discuss the bill in committee.
7. To hold a plenary debate concerning a document already sent to a committee, formally a proposal by the committee to debate it in the plenary and a parliamentary majority are necessary (Tweede Kamer 2016, art.120). Effectively, a parliamentary majority can choose to debate anything.
8. Handelingen 1999–2000 20/4/2000 (Officiële Bekendmakingen 2018).
9. The tool of the thirty-member debate however quickly blunted due to overuse. When they were originally created, thirty-member debates were called emergency debates (*spoeddebatten*). This name soon proved Orwellian as minorities requested so many debates that it was not unheard

- of to have to wait a year for a thirty-member debate to be planned. Hence the name “thirty-member debate” was introduced and the number of thirty-member debates that were held decreased from 65 in 2008 to 13 in 2016.
10. Except perhaps for those systems where the opposition has become so demoralised that they no longer try to propose items for the agenda because they know these proposals are unlikely to be adopted.
 11. Decision making within the *Ältestenrat* is consensual (Sieberer 2006, p.60), so the analysis on voting applies less in that case. The patterns for sabotage may apply here because offering alternatives may be a good way to undermine consensus on putting an issue on the agenda.

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Appendix 1. Excerpt of the Regeling van Werkzaamheden, 18 September 2013

MP	Text	Notes
Voortman (GL; opposition)	Speaker! Last Thursday, it became clear from messages in the media about the letter concerning asylum policy that the junior minister of Safety and Justice would present on Friday, that the “no fault criterion” and the quota for illegals would continue to exist. I would like to have a debate about this and involve the asylum letter in this.	4 MPs in favour
Speaker	A request to hold a debate.	
Schouw (D66; opposition)	Wholehearted support , Madam Speaker.	16 MPs in favour
Fritsma (PVV; opposition)	If the request is broadened to other aspects of asylum policy, including the aspects that are liberalised, like the detention of aliens, the Freedom Party can support the request.	31 MPs in favour
Speaker	You are requesting a plenary debate about the letter than the junior minister has sent.	
Fritsma	Yes, the entire deal. Not just the things that Mrs. Voortman has mentioned, but also for instance the liberalisation of the alien detention. Indeed, the letter as a whole.	
Speaker	That is essentially the request of the GreenLeft at the moment: a plenary debate about the letter of the junior minister of Safety and Justice.	
Leijten (SP; opposition)	We have been waiting for elaboration by the junior minister. Now we have seen this. I think it is very appropriate that we talk about this in the plenary.	46 MPs in favour
Speaker	Support for the debate, thus.	
Azmani (VVD; coalition)	According to the schedule we already have scheduled three debates about the letter, so this would be the third debate request about this letter. I feel that there is a need for parties to have a debate about this. This can be as soon as possible, but that depends on the schedule of the Speaker. I can also imagine that via email or in the committee procedural meeting, <i>we could plan to hold a general committee meeting about this letter. This means that we do not support a fourth debate.</i>	46 MPs in favour 41 MPs against Sabotage attempt
Ouwehand (PvdD; opposition)	I think that this is a hot potato in the coalition. We serve society if we discuss this issue in the plenary at length, so wholehearted support for the proposal of the GreenLeft.	48 MPs in favour 41 MPs against
Bisschop (SGP; opposition)	I can imagine that we need to discuss this at length and firmly, but it seems obvious to connect it to an already planned debate.	48 MPs in favour 44 MPs against
Speaker	So, no support.	
Keijzer (CDA; opposition)	Having heard the words of Mr. Azmani, it surely seems to me a good moment to express support to the request , in order to express that it is really necessary to speak about this.	61 MPs in favour 44 MPs against
Maij (PvdA; coalition)	It seems very important to me to discuss these letters and to discuss this letter in its entirety. We have to see how we can plan this in as soon as possible. Given the agenda, a general committee meeting seems most obvious, as well as to arrange this in a written procedure.	61 MPs in favour 82 MPs against
Speaker	So, no support for a plenary debate.	
Maij	No, not at the moment.	
Klein (50Plus; opposition)	Support for a plenary debate. This seems sufficiently urgent.	63 MPs in favour 82 MPs against

(continued)

Continued.

MP	Text	Notes
Voordewind (CU; opposition)	I see that the coalition is unwilling to come along, which means we must plan a thirty-member debate. That would mean three minutes to speak. This is a broad subject, so I would not wish that for the debate. We would cut ourselves short, so then we opt for general committee meeting with broad speaking time and possibly a longer general committee meeting than we have planned.	63 MPs in favour 87 MPs against
Schouw	If I understood the Labour Party and the Liberal Party correctly, they indicated that they wanted a plenary debate, but given the agenda ... With other words, if the Speaker would see room on the plenary agenda ... That is how I understood it.	
Speaker	No, both were very explicit in their second halves: no support for a plenary debate. I can do nothing else but determine that the majority in the House has expressed that there is no need for a plenary debate at this moment. That was the last thing that Mrs. Maj added. The advantage of the regular procedure is that there is space in the committee for an extended written round to discuss things from the letter in greater detail. That is what I'll add. That is the procedure we have in the House. In that way we can deepen some elements. And I have heard from everyone, Mr. Schouw, that this is exactly what is needed. There is no majority for holding a majority debate.	No debate held.
Voortman	That is too bad. We will take care of this via the committee.	

Sentences indicating support or opposition in bold; First sabotage attempt in italics.

Appendix 2. List of the comparative agenda's project categories

#	Category
1	Macro-Economic Issues and Taxes
2	Civil Rights, Immigration & Civic Integration
3	Health
4	Agriculture & Fishery
5	Labour
6	Education and Culture
7	Environment
8	Energy
10	Transportation
12	Justice, Judiciary & Crime
13	Social Welfare
14	Housing and Urban Development
15	Enterprise, Domestic Trade and Commerce
16	Defense
17	Science, Technology & Communication
18	Foreign Trade
19	Foreign Affairs and Development Aid
20	Government Operatios, Civil Service & Intergovernmental Relations
21	Public Nature and Water Management